Relax with this garden games table

This games table is tough enough to stay outdoors all year long

By John Sillaots

Photo by Christopher Campbell

Built with ceramic tiles and cedar, this games table is tough enough to stay outdoors all year long.

Gardeners often spend too much time working and not enough time relaxing in their gardens. I built this outdoor games table as a reminder to sit down and enjoy the surroundings, perhaps read a book, write in a journal or play a friendly game of checkers.

Start this project with a walk through a tile store. You'll need sixty-four 2" x 2" ceramic tiles-32 each of 2 different colours. Since tiles vary in size and thickness, assemble the checkerboard first, then build the wooden parts to suit. Part sizes listed in the material list might need to be adjusted based on the dimensions dictated by the tiles you select.

Instructions

Build the Support Box

Cut the top, bottom, sides and inner supports from a piece of 3/4"-thick exterior-grade or marine-grade plywood. Dry fit them together, then join permanently with a weatherproof adhesive, either polyurethane glue or Type II carpenters glue and #8 x 1 1/2" hot-dipped galvanized screws. Countersink the screws below the surface then cover the holes with exterior-grade wood filler before sanding and painting. The screw holes on the top will be covered by the checkerboard and top trim members.

Build the Checkerboard

Start by cutting the baseboard from 3/8" exterior plywood. This thickness, combined with the thickness of tiles and adhesive, matches the thickness of the 3/4" top trim members that surround the tiles. Since tile thicknesses vary, adjust your dimensions to fit your tiles by dry-fitting these parts together before settling on the baseboard thickness. Ideally, you want the top surface of the trim members to be level with the top of the tiles. If you have trouble finding a combination of ply and tiles that matches the standard 3/4" wood surrounding them, simply plane thicker trim members down to suit. If you don't have a thickness planer, the parts are small and easy to do with a sharp hand plane.

Because tiles vary in size, set the tiles first before cutting the tile baseboard to its final dimension. There are two things that will ensure a successful tile installation: straight tile alignment and consistent tile spacing. To align the tiles, attach two 3/4" guide strips in an L-shape to the 3/8" baseboard. These straight edges keep the first rows of tiles aligned and square. To keep the tile spacing consistent, insert 1/8" strips of wood between tiles during installation.

To adhere the tiles to the baseboard, use a latex-modified thinset mortar. I used a product called Super Flex manufactured by TEC Specialty Products Inc. Spread the thinset mortar onto the baseboard using an 1/8" notched trowel. Cover as much area as you can comfortably tile in five minutes. The angle of the notched trowel from vertical determines the height of the mortar ridges. What you're after is enough mortar to cover the bottom of the tile when

pushed into place. Too much and it will squish up into the space between the tiles--too little, and your tiles won't be held securely to the plywood.

Let the tiles set for 24 hours before cutting the baseboard to size. Use a tablesaw, with the blade lowered so it doesn't quite make it through the top of the plywood. This prevents the blade from being damaged by the tile or mortar. Use a sharp utility knife to complete the cut through the baseboard.

Next, centre the tile-covered baseboard on the project top and fasten it with glue. Make sure any glue squeeze-out is removed when doing this--hardened blobs of glue will interfere with the installation of the top trim members. Gluing large flat parts together like this can be tricky because they slide around. You can eliminate this problem by hammering three or four 1" finishing nails part way into the project top, then nip off the nails with wire cutters so only a tiny tip of metal remains above the surface. This trick prevents movement of the tile base board completely. Place a heavy weight on top of these parts before setting them aside to dry. After 15 minutes, check the edges again for squeeze-out and remove any while it's still soft.

Top Trim

The area around the tiles is capped by top trim members and trim strips. After ripping a standard 1 x 6 to width for the top trim members, use the leftover wood for the trim strips. Glue these to the underside of the top trim, on edge, then mitre the ends of the assemblies after they're dry. For my project all four sides were mitred to a length of 25". This created a 1/8" grout space between wood and outer tiles, though exact sizes will be slightly different on your project. After gluing the trim parts in place, I sanded the top surfaces at a slight angle to shed the rain.

Before grouting between the tiles, apply finish to the exposed wood. I used three coats of Helmsman Spar Urethane on the top, and a flat black exterior latex on the plywood. When the finish has dried, grout the tiles using more thinset mortar. Apply a generous amount of mortar to the surface of the checkerboard and force it into the joints with a rubber-faced float. Make sure that the joints are completely filled so that there are no air bubbles or gaps. Remove the excess mortar by pulling diagonally across the tiles with the float. Rinse a sponge in clean water and wipe away any remaining mortar. Continue to rinse out the sponge and wipe away mortar until the joints are smooth and level with the tiles. After about 30 minutes a hazy film will appear on the surface of the tiles. Wipe this off using a soft cloth.

Installation

A 12" dia. lazy Susan bearing allows the table to be rotated so it can be adjusted to take full advantage of the sun. The bearing is sandwiched between two discs of 3/4" plywood. Lay out these discs with a compass and cut them out with a hand-held jigsaw. The bearing is attached to the plywood discs with 3/4" screws. Attach the bearing to one disc first, then drill oversize access holes to reach the screws to attach the other side. For my installation I used a 31/2" dia. steel post and attached the bearing assembly to the post with metal L-brackets. Another option would be to use a cedar 4 x 4 post set into a concrete footing to support the table. If you choose the 4 x 4 approach, make wooden support brackets using the template from the plan and secure them with biscuits and polyurethane glue. This treatment results in a more decorative look.

The final step is to add the game pieces. You could use traditional game pieces, but a local craft supply store provided something more appropriate for the gardenÂ—tiny wooden birdhouses. Paint the birdhouses to coordinate with your tiles and even between games, your outdoor games table will look great.

Tools and Materials

Part	Material	Size (T x W x L*)	Qty.
Bottom	exterior-grade ply	3/4" x 20" x 24"	1
Sides	exterior-grade ply	3/4" x 3 1/2" x 24"	2
Inside supports	exterior-grade ply	3/4" x 2 3/4" x 20"	2
Top	exterior-grade ply	3/4" x 24" x 24"	1
Tile baseboard	exterior-grade ply	3/8" x 18" x 18"*	1
Top trim members	cedar	3/4" x 4 3/8" x 26"*	4
Trim strips	cedar	3/4" x 1 1/8" x 26"*	4
Lazy Susan supports	exterior-grade ply	3/4" x 12" dia.	2
Lazy Susan bearing	exterior-grade ply	12" dia.	1
Tiles	ceramic	2" x 2"	32 x 2 colours
Adhesive/grout	TEC Specialty Products Inc. Super Flex thinset mortar		1 bag
Support post	cedar	3 1/2" x 3 1/2" x 72"	1

* Oversize part. Trim to fit your project

* Length indicates grain direction

Plan

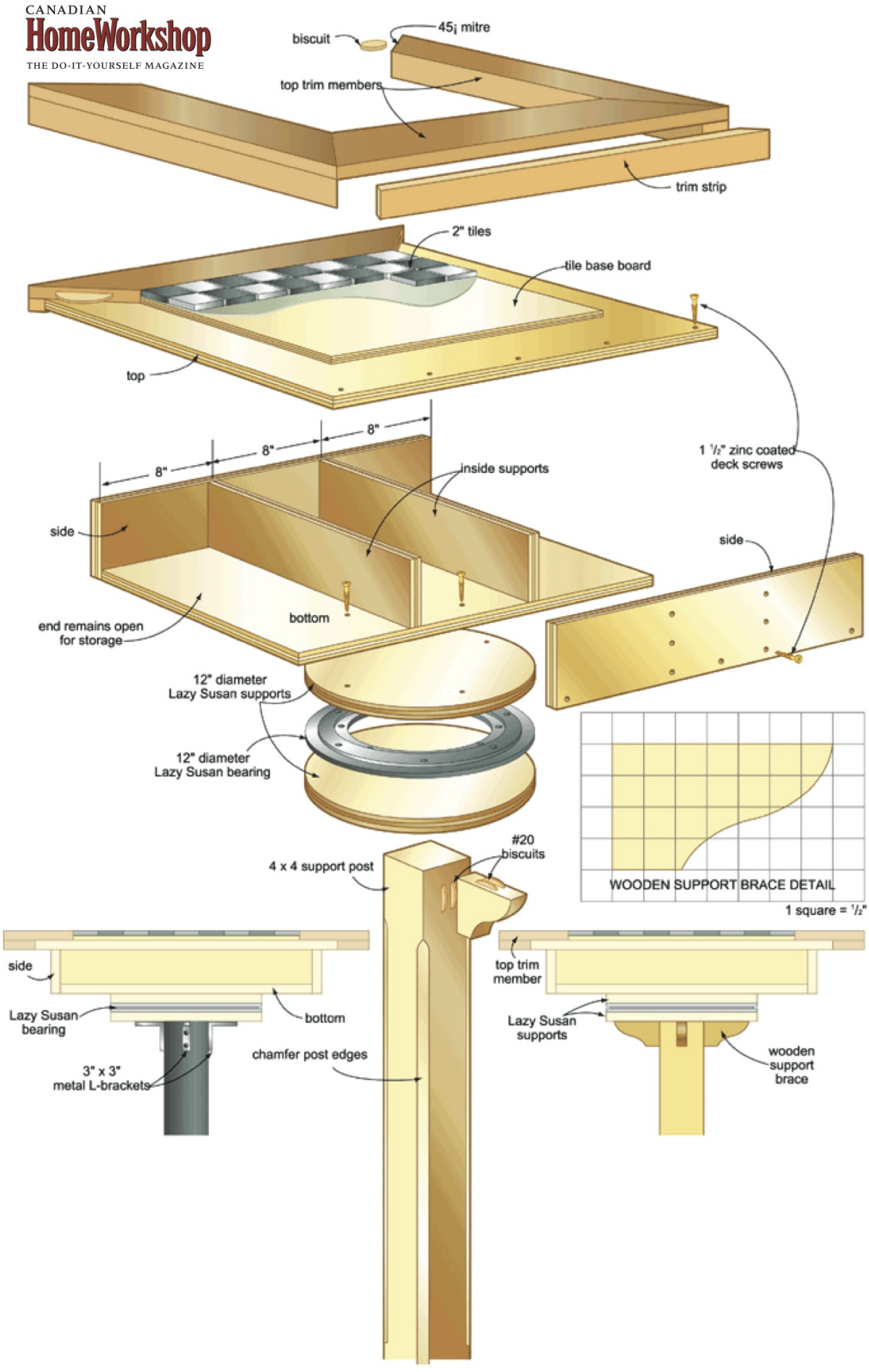
CANADIAN
HomeWorkshop
THE DO-IT-YOURSELF MAGAZINE
biscuit
45¡ mitre
top trim members
trim strip
2" tiles
tile base board
top
8"
8"
8"
inside supports
1 ½" zinc coated deck screws
side
side
bottom
end remains open for storage
12" diameter Lazy Susan supports
12" diameter Lazy Susan bearing
#20 biscuits
4 x 4 support post
WOODEN SUPPORT BRACE DETAIL
1 square = ½"
side
Lazy Susan bearing
bottom
3" x 3" metal L-brackets
chamfer post edges
top trim member
Lazy Susan supports
wooden support brace

Illustration by Len Churchill